

Filleting a Fish

Excerpted from "An Introduction to Fishing" by Tom Cwynar



Cleaning fish is easy after a little practice. You can clean fish on a dock, paddle, cooler lid or flat rock. Many fishing accesses and parks provide fish cleaning stations with water for rinsing fish.

Handy fish cleaning tools include a sharp knife, a scaler and a glove to protect your hand and help grip the fish. Cleaning fish on old newspaper will make clean-up easy.



Remove the scales from small fish that will be cooked whole or large fish that will be steaked by scraping the skin with a dull knife, a spoon or an inexpensive scaling tool.

Pan-dress fish by cutting along the sides of the fins on the back and behind the stomach and pulling them out. Cut off the head, then slit the belly and scrape out the entrails.

Fillet larger fish by cutting down to the backbone behind the head and sliding the knife blade with a sawing motion toward the tail. Slice out the rib bones from top to bottom.

Skin fillets by cutting down to the skin near the tail, turning the knife blade and, pulling firmly on the tail section, sliding and sawing the knife between the skin and the flesh.

Most anglers choose to fillet and skin bass, crappie, walleye and carp. Sunfish and bluegill are usually scaled and pan-dressed. Remove the head, entrails and pectoral fins from trout, but do not scale them.

Peel the tough skin from catfish with pliers and fillet the meat or cut it into chunks. Steak very large fish by cutting down through the backbone at 1-inch intervals.

Cooking

Fish taste great and are good for you. They are high in digestible protein and low in fat. Fish is a wonderful natural food, especially when you're eating the ones you caught yourself.

Fish can be fried, smoked, broiled, baked, poached, steamed, microwaved or boiled or put in chowders or stews. Use simple recipes that let the fine flavor of the fish come through. Follow recipes carefully and don't overcook.

Fish flesh is done when it becomes opaque and flakes easily. Test for doneness by probing the thickest portions with a fork. If the flesh flakes easily or separates from the bone, it is done. Further cooking will detract from its flavor and texture.

As is the case with sweet corn, the sooner you can get the fish to the table, the better it will taste. Fish flesh is sterile when it comes out of the water but it starts to go bad quickly, unless you take care of it. Preserve the quality of the fish you catch by keeping them alive or by keeping them cold.

During cool months, live baskets, stringers or live wells will keep your fish alive until it's time to go home. When fishing in warmer months, bring along a cooler of ice to keep your catch in. Drain the cooler occasionally, so that dead fish do not soak in the water.

Use fish quickly. Refrigerated fish begin to lose their flavor after only 24 hours. Frozen fish start to deteriorate in quality after 2 to 4 months.

Some fish, such as white bass and largemouth bass, have a strong-tasting dark layer of flesh along their lateral lines that should be cut away before cooking or storage.

Panfrying

White meat fish make excellent candidates for the frying pan. The oil keeps the flesh moist, and a coating keeps the meat's natural juices from cooking out.

Dust pan-dressed small fish or the fillets from larger fish in seasoned flour and place them in an open, heavy skillet in which about 1/4 inch of oil has been heated to almost "foaming". Don't crowd the fish or they will come out soggy. Cook each side over medium heat until brown. The flesh flakes easily when done.

For a thicker coating, dip fillets in milk or beaten egg and then coat them with crumbs, cornmeal or seasoned flour before cooking. Drain the pieces on paper towels before serving.

Deep frying

Use a thermometer to ensure your deep frying oil is between 360 and 380 degrees. You can deep fry in a skillet by using enough oil to completely submerge the fish.

Dip the fish in batter and place them gently in the oil. Avoid overcrowding them. Cook from 2-5 minutes until brown. Dry on paper towels. Allow the oil to reheat between batches.

Baking

Baking works well for large fish. Line a shallow baking dish with aluminum foil for easy removal of the fish. Baste the fish with a seasoned butter and lemon juice mixture, cover the pan with aluminum foil or a lid and cook for 10 to 30 minutes, depending on the thickness of the fish, at 375 degrees. Test frequently to see if the fish is done. Baste the fish in its own juices during cooking for more flavor. Save the pan juices for soups or sauces.

Broiling and Barbecuing

The high heat of broiling and barbecuing can dry fish flesh, unless the fish are basted often with sauce or oils. Broil skin side up first, then turn carefully. Thin fillets do not need turning. A small amount of liquid in the broiling pan will help keep the fish moist.

Microwaving

Place fish in a dish or on a plate with the thickest portions to the outside. Brush fish with butter/lemon mixture and cover with waxed paper. If fish "pops," cook at a lower setting. Check for doneness frequently. Add liquid and seasonings and cover dish with plastic wrap to poach or steam fish.

Cooking Methods

	Pan fry	Deep Fry	Bake	Broil	Barbecue	Microwave
Sunfish	Excellent	Excellent	Good			
Bluegill	Excellent	Excellent	Good			
Catfish	Good	Excellent		Good		Good
Bass	Excellent	Good	Good			
Trout	Good		Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Good
Walleye	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Good		
Carp	Good	Excellent				
Sucker	Good	Excellent				